

## Thresholds

### I. Introduction: Finding the Line

Think of yourself in a blank, black, empty, timeless space. Fill it with your ideal image of our natural world. Now picture trails and natural wonders littered with trash, surrounded by cars and traffic, millions of footprints pounding their way to snap a photo for their feed. Imagine hundreds of initials carved into the most beautiful rock faces on Earth. I believe the protection of the environment should be the priority of all tourists, weekend warriors, and full-time adventurers.

The journey to a balanced green Earth is an endless and undefined path that will be filled with invention. The future of Earth is uncertain, as well as the future of our relationship with nature. There are many threats to the organic world, and the preservation of our parks addresses just one fraction of the problems, none of which can be solved without an understanding of humanity's complicated relationship with nature; we are part of nature after all. Our well being relies on nature's health, but society enables habits destructive to nature, like unsustainable amounts of consumption and trash production.

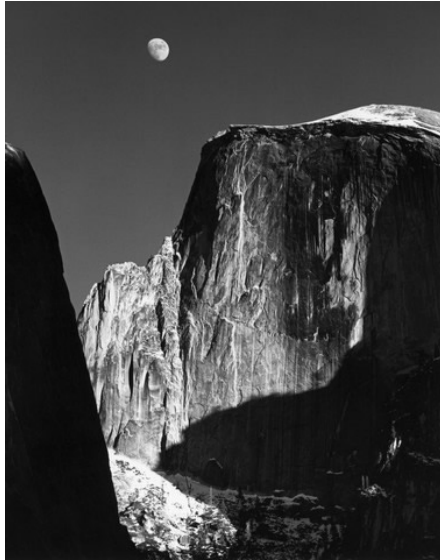
I love climbing and hiking outdoors, and my passion for nature has led to my personal efforts to preserve and rebuild nature. I want to create a tunnel to transport my audience into a harmonious relationship with nature. I am building and photographing a portal, a doorway into nature and a symbol of human presence, on trails to create thresholds between manipulated and natural environments. However, the line between manipulated and natural is foggy; can humans be considered natural if we constantly defy the natural

cycle of life? Pure nature does not exist. National parks like Yosemite are tainted with pollution and other human tracks. A photograph of a landscape is also a portrait of the people whose actions have sculpted the land.

With my sculpted portals and photographs I explore my relationship with nature, and provide others with a space to contemplate their own relationships with and ideas of nature. The portal may lead us to imagine a dystopian, uninhabitable future, a paradise of sprawling nature harmonized with humanity, or a world where only the ghosts of ruined skylines lie beneath years of overpowering vegetative growth that prove the Anthropocene occurred.

## II. Contextual Discussion: From Ansel Adams to Katie Lambert

At a peak in the industrialization and expansion of mechanized society in the early 1900s, Ansel Adams showed the country the beautiful Earth that was neglected and abused. In 1932 Adams spoke about the power of outdoor activities to reconnect people's natural spirits with the land: "Rock climbing should be considered a thrilling means to a more important end" (Retrospect). He saw the ability of hiking and climbing to renew a person's loyalty to nature. Despite the success of his astounding photographs, consumer culture prevailed and nature suffered. Adams contributed to the preservation of National Parks, but he could not save them entirely.



Moon and Half Dome (1960) Ansel Adams. Adams' photographs remain iconic, but the desire and diligence of our nation to preserve nature fluctuates.

Present day rock climbers still relate to Ansel Adams' opinion on the power of outdoor adventures. For example, Katie Lambert, an accomplished climber says, "The stresses of life can overwhelm, but if we center ourselves through climbing, a connection to purpose can be attained and environmental awareness and appreciation will follow" (Lambert).

Climbers create fluid poetic duets with the rocks they climb. In states of flow, the climber and the rock are alone in the world. In these moments climbers become dancers and artists. Despite the serene potential of climbing cliffs and boulders, the thousands of climbers and hikers that visit the most popular and iconic destinations, like Yosemite and Red River Gorge, quickly destroy and litter the landscape. Yosemite Valley is filled with pollution, and the Gorge is plagued by graffiti. The National Parks Conservation Association reports that parks including the Grand Canyon and Joshua Tree will not have "natural visibility" until the 22<sup>nd</sup> century, according to the current rate of pollution clean up (Polluted Parks). Haze caused by pollution clouds the natural views, and harms the air for wildlife, plants, and humans.



“One of the haziest days at Yosemite National Park, California” (Visibility Protection)

As efficiency and commercialization thrived in the mid 1900s, and the land and people suffered from chemicals and pollution, Rachel Carson became the hero and creator of the Environmental movement. She researched the damages of human activities, like spraying pesticides, and shared her ideas with the world with her book, *Silent Spring* (Carson). Her movement led to Earth Art, monumental alterations and installations in isolated landscapes far from galleries. Earth artists desired to reconnect with the natural world, and interact with the land in revolutionary ways. The gallery was no longer the only home for art. Artists collaborated with nature, and used it as a tool and canvas. Robert Smithson and other Earth Artists altered the earth on enormous scales, disturbing large areas of remote land. More recently, artists like Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long employed more romantic, delicate, and ephemeral methods of collaboration with nature.

Contemporary artists like Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long also use nature as their studio and media. They turn their walks and experiences into sculptures and photographs. Circles of stones and flowing lines like rivers are prominent symbols in the works of Long



and Goldsworthy. The graceful sculptures symbolize harmony and the cycle of life, and they commemorate the time spent in nature to build them.



*Ice Spiral-Tree Soul* (1987) Andy Goldsworthy. Goldsworthy uses only found natural materials to make ephemeral collaborations with nature.

Another contemporary artist whose work I connect with visually and conceptually is Crystal Morey. In an interview in *Hi-fructose*, she says, “The narrative I aim to create lies somewhere between an imagined space and reality, one that entices the mind and hopefully reminds us about our deep connection with the land around us” (Min). Although my project looks nothing like Crystal Morey’s anthropomorphic figurative work, I could use the same language to describe my portals and photographs. I hope to shorten the gap between our conceptions of society and nature. Morey manipulates humans and animals to create symbiotic beings. She also says, “I hope to stir a curiosity rooted in our relationship to plants and animals around us.” Morey sculpts a bodily, mystic relationship with wildlife,

although harmony rarely results from our interference with nature. I also examined the manipulation and beauty of earth with my photographs and portals.



*A Rock in Swift Waters: Brown Bear*, Porcelain and Glaze. Crystal Morey (2017). Morey's sculptures seem more 'human' and earnest than lifelike figures. Her creatures also inspire empathy for nature.

### III. Methodology: Making a Photograph

Over the summer in Arizona I experimented with a large format camera. I love the effort and dedication each image requires, and the time I get to spend outdoors to make the photographs. Based on my experience in Arizona, I continued to use large format cameras for my thesis. The large format camera inspires many emotions, in an order like this: sore back, knees, and feet, cold hands, absolute control, nervous surrender, relieving trust, surprising success, disappointing mishaps, unexpected poetic outcomes. I hike through woods with a backpack that contains a wooden 4x5inch camera, a metal tripod, several 4x5inch plastic negative carriers, a lens, a magnifier, a shutter release cord, a light meter, a camera hood, a towel, a little notebook and a pen, a digital camera, wire and wire cutters, and a water bottle. I may also have a 35mm camera around my neck, and a large black

circle with twigs tied to the rim in my hands. Once I find a photo opportunity, I set up the camera, and adjust the frame, check the light meter, focus the image, load the film, and hope I did not forget a step. I pause, look at my subject, wait for the perfect light, and press the button. I take out the film carrier, record the settings, and think about making a second exposure, in case the first one does not work, but I never do, because I would not do anything different, I trust my instincts in the moment, and my hands are getting cold. Time to pack up and move on. In a few days I develop the negatives, and after 30 minutes of anticipation, and dancing and agitating chemicals in the dark, I see the resulting negative image. Another few days later I print the negatives, and I get to see the final results of my weeks of work. The anticipation makes every image a cherished memory. The wooden 4x5 camera creates magic and reveals simplicity. The plainly visible parts of the camera do not create mystery, but the way the glass, wood, and metal mechanisms work together to make an image stirs magic. One stranger asked me while I worked in the Red River Gorge, "is the camera in the box, or is the box the camera?"



My Zone VI 4x5 Field Camera, and the velvet portal in the Matthaei Botanical Gardens. I hung the portal from the tree with wire.

I wanted the viewing experience of the photographs to be intimate and magical. I began the year with the intent to build a dome made of branches that would encompass my photographs and a life sized human sculpted out of branches and rocks. The person was contemplating the photographs of nature that hung on the inner walls of the room. When I started to build a dome out of branches, I started with the circular base. I tied together branches in a circle with wire. Instead of building the circle up into walls, I hung it on the wall. The circle of branches hung in the entrance to my studio. This portal became the center of my project, and a way to infuse sculpture into my photographs, instead of the figure of branches that held the place of the real audience. The circle of branches simply and powerfully symbolizes the circle of life; at the same time it suggests an entrance.



The portal hung in my studio for months, fixing the symbol in my thoughts.

I made another circle of branches, this time around a circle of black velvet fabric that would create greater contrast and juxtaposition in the photographs. The dark fabric contrasted with bright skies and snow, and the emptiness of the black contrasted with the rich landscapes. Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long's methods of working outside inspired me, but I did not have the time to build a new sculpture in every location I visited. Instead, I brought one black velvet portal lined with branches to every location. The singular portal creates the illusion of teleportation when seen in multiple locations in the photographs.

#### IV. Creative Work: Experience of Photographs

I wanted the viewer's experience with my photographs to be tactile and intimate. In order to enhance the sculptural quality of the photographs, I chose not to display the photographs on a wall, but to collect them in a handmade box that was displayed in a domed canopy of black fabric. The wooden box required weeks of work to build. I could have framed the prints, or printed them in a book in a fraction of the time, but those



portal. With my photographs I welded the portal and nature together so that they could not be disconnected.

I built a small wood frame for every final 4x5" image that fit into the circular wooden box. The carefully crafted box was displayed on a crescent shaped table, underneath a domed canopy of black velvet and chiffon fabric. The crescent moon shaped table embraced the participant as she entered the dome through a break in the curtains. The box was faintly visible through the sheer fabric.



The box and table were visible through the sheer portion of the drapes.

In the box I included photographs of nature with and without the portal to create a contrast between untouched and transformed environments. Each element of the installation was designed to support the images of the portal. Because the portal was round, the box had to be round, as well as the table, and the encompassing canopy. The portal was black in order to create a vacant space in the image that the viewer can imagine entering. The domed canopy offers a similar space for the viewer to enter in order to view and consider nature. Circular pieces of black felt make up the floor of the dome, and they



reach out of the entrance to guide people inside. The soft felt reiterates the image of the circular portal for viewers when they enter and exit the dome. In the end, the photographs and the black portal are both means of transportation into a nature-centered mindset.



The dome hung from the light grid of the gallery, and the drapes puddled onto the ground. The floor is made of dozens of felt circles, sewn together.





The crescent table followed the curve of the dome and embraced whoever entered. To see the photographs, viewers pulled up on the black tabs, pulling out the slides.

The photographs are contact prints of the 4x5 inch negatives. The borders of the negatives are visible, as are any light leaks. The contact prints provide a raw image, my form of wabi-sabi, “the art of finding beauty in imperfection and profundity in earthiness” (Lawrence). I chose not to cover the edges of the images with mattes because I wanted as few barriers between the viewer and the image as possible. The visible edges of the photographs allow them to feel sculptural, as well as the viewer’s act of holding the small, framed prints in her hands.



Images taken at Wildwing Lake in Brighton, MI; Grand Ledge, MI; and Sleeping Bear Dunes in Glen Arbor, MI. The first photograph features the black velvet portal.

#### V. Conclusion: Destination Manifesto

I hoped to rejuvenate an innate attachment to nature in myself, and the viewers of my photographs, to motivate appreciation and preservation of the natural, beautiful world that the entire circle of life relies on.

To reach more audiences with my current work, I will distribute a small book of photographs. I hope to work with another landscape photographer in order to learn methods of funding, marketing, and showcasing my photographic projects, as well as techniques to improve the quality of my work.

I will continue to photograph nature, especially as I venture westward. The mountains and the sun draw me back to the Southwest, where every night begins with a colorful sunset on a mountainous horizon. I am eager to create and disperse more photographs that



might connect people to nature. On future trips, I will leave behind my portal in order to find already present interactions or conflicts between human and natural activity.



This photograph was made at the Matthaei Botanical Gardens. The portal's rim of branches connects it to the wild branches of the tree.

Funding was made possible by the Puffin Foundation  
and the Stamps School of Art & Design.

## Works Cited

- Ansel, Adams. *Moon and Half Dome*. 1960. The Ansel Adams Gallery  
[https://shop.anseladams.com/Moon\\_and\\_Half\\_Dome\\_p/5010117-u.htm](https://shop.anseladams.com/Moon_and_Half_Dome_p/5010117-u.htm). Accessed April 2017.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Mariner, 1962.
- Goldsworthy, Andy. *Ice Spiral-Tree Soul*. 1987.  
<http://patriciadaliheimwrapped.weebly.com/andy-goldsworthy--environmental-art.html>.  
 Accessed 20 April 2017.
- Lambert, Katie. "Out on a Ledge: Way of Life." *Climbing*, 5 Oct. 2016,  
<http://www.climbing.com/places/out-on-a-ledge-way-of-life/>. Accessed Nov. 2016.
- Lawrence, Robyn. "Wabi-Sabi: The Art of Imperfection." *UTNE Reader*, Oct. 2001,  
<http://www.utne.com/mind-and-body/wabi-sabi>. Accessed April 2017.
- Min, Jeff. "Crystal Morey." *Hi-Fructose*, Dec. 2017, Magazine. 44-46.
- Morey, Crystal. *A Rock in Swift Waters: Brown Bear*. 2017.  
<http://www.crystalmorey.com/a-rock-in-swift-waters-brown-bear.html>. Accessed 18 April 2017.
- "Polluted Parks: Fact Sheets." National Parks Conservation Association, 5 Sept. 2013,  
<https://www.npca.org/resources/2736-polluted-parks-fact-sheets#sm.00001tflgbdnz1cw5rrdl2bd775ob>. Accessed April 2017.
- "Retrospect - 1931." *Thehighsierra.org*. <http://www.thehighsierra.org/retrospect.htm>  
 Accessed April 2017.
- "Visibility Protection." National Park Service, 24 Feb. 2005,  
<https://www.nature.nps.gov/air/regs/visibility.cfm>. Accessed April 2017